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ABSTRACT

A comprehensive analysis of articles and editorials was performed on "Ebony" magazine editions published two years before and after the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The writings of the publisher were also studied, as were personal interviews with the editors of "Ebony." Editorial content was analyzed with respect to the major racial trends in the United States during the 1960s. The results indicated that "Ebony" published 8% more articles related to civil rights after Adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 than before the act. It was concluded that the increase may have resulted from the magazine's growing awareness of civil rights issues in many different social spheres. The study also found that "Ebony" served as a civil rights advocate, contributing to the social and political awareness of black Americans during the 1960s. (Author/RL)

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EBONY'S CIVIL RIGHTS FOCUS: A STUDY OF EDITORIAL POLICY BEFORE AND AFTER THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964

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Introduction

The civil rights era of the 1960s shook the American conscience. But accompanying the racial conflict of this period was a revolutionary growth in black consciousness. The racial identity of black Americans began to emerge from a state of self-pity to a state of self-pride. Expansion of the black middle class, accompanied by other mass movements, resulted in what some historians have called a black "mass culture." The black press of the 1960s mirrored this phenomenon. One publication, in particular, was aimed at raising black consciousness in America. Ebony mirrored the total development of the national black community, and its drawing cards were "success" and "black pride."

The flagship magazine of Johnson Publishing Company, Ebony helped shape the social and political perspectives of blacks during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. However, this role was not the primary mission of the monthly, general interest, picture magazine. Consequently, some researchers have, unduly, found fault with Ebony for what they allege to be the magazine's lack of aggressiveness on civil rights issues.[1]

Ebony's coverage and treatment of civil rights issues during the 1960s constituted the subject of this paper. A study of the magazine's editorial content was undertaken to compare Ebony's editorial policy before and after the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The purpose was to investigate changes in the magazine's coverage of civil rights issues during a four-year period of the 1960s civil rights movement.

The researcher focused on two central issues:

(1) Did Ebony's editorial content reflect greater emphasis on civil rights issues after adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1964?

(2) Did Ebony serve as an advocate during the civil rights era of the 1960s?

Answers to these issued provide a fuller understanding of how Ebony acted and reacted with regard to the historic revolution in black consciousness. This result is significant, because Ebony was and is a leading member of the black press. Today, as in the past, the black press fills a basic need to know. But more importantly, as the black press grows, black men and women move closer to full participation in American life.[2]

Method

The approach used in the study was a qualitative analysis of Ebony's editorial content related specifically to civil rights issues. To facilitate comprehensive observation and comparisons, the investigation covered all Ebony editions published two years before and after adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This pool of 48 editions included each monthly issue of Ebony from July, 1962 to July, 1966, with the exception of the July, 1964 issue, which was published during the month Congress enacted the '64 act. Although the major focus of the study covered a four-year period, the researcher examined Ebony editions published throughout the 1960s to help broaden the scope and reliability of the study.

Some unscientific quantitative comparisons were attempted to enhance the perspective of the study. A percentage of civil rights related

articles was obtained from the total number of articles published by Ebony before the act of '64. A similar percentage was obtained for articles published after enactment of the act of '64. Comparisons were then performed. Because trends and events of the civil rights era affected Ebony's editorial content, the researcher attempted to evaluate content in relation to race trends of the 1960s.

Several primary sources of evidence were used in evaluating Ebony's civil rights focus before and after the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These sources included articles and editorials published in the magazine, as well as writings of Ebony Publisher John Harold Johnson. Significant contributions to the study were made by Ebony Managing Editor Charles L. Sanders and Ebony senior Staff Editor Alex Poinsett. Both gentlemen were interviewed by the researcher at Ebony's national headquarters in Chicago. The remarks of both men were especially pertinent, because they served as Ebony editors during the civil rights era of the 1960s. Their statements were included to help explain the magazine's editorial policy and format during this period.

No single person has influenced the editorial policy of Ebony more than its publisher. Since Johnson established Ebony in 1945, he has maintained editorial control. Among those who have worked for him, Johnson is considered a shrewd boss who keeps tight control on all activities, and major stories and layouts must be routed through him.[3] In many respects, Ebony exhibits the personal philosophy of its publisher. For these reasons, particular attention was devoted to the opinions and philosophy of Mr. Johnson. The study analyzed several of his publisher's statements which have been featured occasionally in Ebony.

Johnson's "Interlocking" Editorial Philosophy

During the 1960s Ebony was published in concert with two other Johnson publications. These two periodicals were Negro Digest, established in 1942, and Jet, launched in 1951. In accordance with the editorial philosophy of their publisher, the three magazines complemented one another. However, each magazine exhibited its own unique character and function.

The managing editor of Ebony recalled that the three magazines were chiefly dedicated to the reporting of events as they affected black people during the period.[4] Jet, a pocket-size, weekly publication, covered fast breaking news stories and mirrored events which influenced the lives of black Americans. Negro Digest, now Black World, would give a philosophical interpretation of several events which Jet had reported a month or two earlier. In addition to mirroring the events reported by Jet, Ebony published in-depth accounts on selected news happenings. Ebony also published editorials which interpreted the news happenings and their impact on the national black community.

The implicit cooperation among the staffs of the three publications must be regarded as an important influence upon the editorial content of Ebony during the period. Ebony, however, was endowed with a special role during the civil rights era. This role was the heightening of black consciousness about the black revolution in America. The role was a clear reflection of Johnson's philosophy, which advocated raising black consciousness to the point where blacks would take charge of their lives and ultimately of their own liberation.

Editorial Content Before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (1960-1963)

According to Alex Poinsett, Ebony senior staff editor, three general patterns characterized the magazine's editorial policy in the years which preceded the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These recurrent patterns were advocacy, documentation, and reporting.[5] Ebony specialized in the simple reporting of civil rights events, such as the jailing of Dr. Martin Luther King during the Birmingham, Alabama, protest of April 3, 1963. The magazine's articles addressed what was happening to black Americans in the areas of education, unemployment, housing, politics, sports, and entertainment. In each area, Ebony editors exposed deprivations experienced by black people and urged federal and state authorities to take action to redress black grievances. This editorial perspective ran throughout all issues of the magazine published before the '64 act.

Specific civil rights issues which Ebony repeatedly confronted were de facto school segregation, discrimination in public housing, and discriminatory hiring practices. Ebony's editorials also raised fundamental questions about the conditions of blacks in America.

During the early 1960s, Ebony began advocating that black Americans must learn about their own heritage in order to acquire a sense of history, needed to formulate approaches to problems of the period. Senior Editor Bennett began publishing accounts on black history. Ebony also published "international stories," which was a practice few other magazines attempted during the period. Collectively, the editors of Ebony were dedicated to

helping black Americans define themselves, rather than allowing them to rely on definitions afforded by the white establishment press.

The Rise of Martin Luther King

Starting with the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, the non-violent movement under Martin Luther King, Jr. attained much of the credit for civil rights victories of the 1960s.[6] From 1960 to 1964, the major objective of the black liberation movement continued to be civil rights legislation. The main targets were Congress and the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Pressure was exerted more aggressively than during the '50s, as blacks increasingly resorted to sit-ins, marches, and other forms of direct, non-violent confrontation.

While King was attracting national attention for his civil rights stands, Ebony told the world who he was and what he was about. The magazine chronicled all of King's crusades in the South, and followed him to Norway in December of 1964, when King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In addition, Ebony supported King financially as well as ideologically.[7]

In the November 1962 issue, Ebony characterized King as "one of the best known Negro leaders of all times."[8] The same issue portrayed King on the front cover and noted, "The Reverend King so typifies the tenor of the current civil rights battle that his name must take its place in history along with those of Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass."

King's rise marked a significant development in black consciousness. As Ebony attempted to mirror and support this phenomenon, the magazine used him as its catalyst. In addition to highlighting his civil rights activities,

Ebony published written statements contributed by the civil rights leader. In August of 1963, the magazine carried an article by King entitled "A Letter From Birmingham Jail," which related his perspective on the civil rights protests which gripped Birmingham, Alabama during that time.[9]

Ebony espoused the political and social philosophies of King because they were compatible with its own during the early 1960s. While the black middle class was beginning to expand significantly, blacks still lived in a segregated society, which restricted their use of public accomodations. Under these social conditions, Ebony's articles and editorials encouraged blacks to use the vote to overthrow oppressive governmental organs and to use their economic power in the form of boycotts to discourage discriminatory commercial practices. As advocated by King, Ebony's editorial position on civil rights issues stressed non-violent protest and progress through legislation and litigation.

Ebony During the Growth of Confrontation Politics

As the period preceding enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 began to expire, black Americans grew restless. They had observed some progress on the civil rights front, but for most blacks the progress was extremely slow and modest. Ebony reflected the attitudes of blacks at this time in an editorial entitled "Remaining Walls," published in November, 1963. The editorial commented, "By measuring how far he has yet to go before he reaches it, one realizes how shockingly segregated America still is."[10] The editorial cited segregation in public schools, job discrimination, and segregated housing as walls which separated the Negro from his civil

rights. Barriers to public accomodation still confronted black Americans despite the enactment of earlier civil rights legislation.

Johnson expressed the growing restlessness of the national black community in a publisher's statement printed in Ebony's September, 1963 issue. On the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, Johnson noted, that "this is not an occasion for hosannas and hurrahs. The freedom proclaimed by Abraham Lincoln is not yet a reality. It is restricted today by state laws in the South, by moribund customs in the North, by the fears, anxieties, and rigidities of millions in the South, North, East and West."[11]

In the summer of 1963, the restless attitude of blacks expressed itself in the form of widespread protest. Civil rights demonstrations and boycotts occurred in almost every major urban area in the country. Protests in Boston and Harlem saw blacks demanding an end to discrimination in the construction industry and de facto segregation in the schools.[12] Consistent with King's civil rights activities, black Americans became involved in a new order of "confrontation politics." Slowly, the racial battleground was shifting out of the South and into Northern and Western ghettos, where residents and leaders were more concerned with the conditions of daily life than with citizenship rights.

Black consciousness had risen to the point where black Americans were no longer afraid to confront the federal government about the slow pace of racial equality. Bennett described this temperament in his article titled "Mood of the Negro." Bennett concluded, "For better or worse, for good or ill, Negro Americans are heading for a no-man's land of open and continuous protest. The open protests in the South and the deep and awesome stillness in the ghettos of the North are portents of a volcanic thrust that

will not be denied. America has a thoroughly restive minority population on its hands."[13]

Two assassinations in 1963 fueled the momentum of black confrontation politics. Medger Evers, a prominent civil rights leader, was gunned down in the doorway of his Jackson, Mississippi, home. And President John F. Kennedy was fatally shot during a Dallas, Texas, motorcade in his honor. Both occurrences received sympathetic coverage in Ebony. Evers was remembered when Ebony published his article, "Why I Live In Mississippi," in its September, 1963 issue.[14]

The late President Kennedy was praised and eulogized in an Ebony photo-editorial titled "Tribute to John F. Kennedy," which appeared in the magazine's January, 1964 issue.[15] Ebony did not soon forget that Kennedy was the first American president to declare that segregation was "morally wrong." In recognition of his civil rights achievements, Ebony's February, 1964 issue told how Kennedy's record had surpassed that of Abraham Lincoln.[16]

Ebony and the March on Washington

In August of 1963, 250,000 blacks and whites gathered at the Lincoln Monument in Washington to conduct the largest single protest demonstration in U. S. history. The occasion marked the summit of confrontation politics during the civil rights movement. Marchers demanded legislation to end discrimination in education, housing, employment, and in the courts.[17] Ebony reporters and photographers were there, as evidenced by the content of the magazine's November, 1963 issue.

Ebony portrayed the huge turnoit on its front cover and reported on

highlights of the mass demonstration. In the article "Biggest Protest March," editor Lerone Bennett, Jr. reported, "All through the night of August 27 and into the morning, they came into Washington, D. C., to lay their grievances before the public and to demand enactment of meaningful civil rights legislation. America had never seen such a crowd."[18] Bennett described the demonstration's impact on Congress as uncertain. The effect of the march on participants, however, was profound. "The participants knew that if the March changed no votes in Congress or no hearts in America that it had changed them. Those who thought, in the beginning, that it was too radical; the young people who didn't want to wait another minute, and the old ones who had waited, now, for 81 and 82 and 94 years. . . ."

The "March on Washington" set the stage for the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which would occur less than one year after the historic protest. Ebony's editorial content up until that time continued to demonstrate its character as a feature and picture magazine. Sports and entertainment stories of interest to black readers constituted a significant share of the magazine's editorial content. Stories relating to civil rights issues did not comprise a substantial share of Ebony's editorial content. Such articles were generally categorized under the content heading "RACE."

Ebony carried numerous articles focusing on race relations before the adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Such titles as "First Negro Astronaut Candidate" and "The Negro In the FBI" were common to the magazine during the period. Ebony's emphasis on integration, especially with respect to de facto segregation in the schools, typified the thinking and strategies

of most black civil rights leaders of the times.

The verbal content and tone of Ebony editorials continued their tradition of being critical and often sarcastic in their treatment of racial injustice. Consistently the magazine called attention to the severity of the nation's racial problems in editorials such as "The Shame of America"[19] and "A Time For Federal Action."[20] More consistently than any other feature of the magazine, the photo-editorials reiterated civil rights concerns.

Two innovations which the magazine initiated during the early sixties were writings on black history and Ebony's annual special editions. Bennett has been credited with popularizing black history during the 1960s. In 1962, Johnson Publishing Company published Bennett's Before The Mayflower, a perceptive sketch of black American history.[21] Ebony carried the book in serial form[22] in addition to several other series on black history written by Bennett.

Convinced of its mission to increase black consciousness, Ebony began a series of annual special issues consisting of reports and essays on a specific theme. These special issues addressed urgent problems confronting the national black community. The first such issue was published in Spetember of 1963 and remembered Frederick Douglass in the cover story "Frederick Douglass: Father of the Protest Movement."[23] The issue also contained the writings of several civil rights leaders, including Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young, Jr.

Adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

On July 2, 1964, Congress passes a sweeping civil rights bill which included provisions prohibiting discrimination in public accomodations and

discrimination in employment. The bill was enacted with strong support from President Lyndon Johnson, after the Senate ended a Southern filibuster by imposing cloture.[24] Some historians of the period regarded the legislation as the most significant civil rights law since 1875.

In its August, 1964 editorial titled "Big Step In Right Direction," Ebony called the signing of the civil rights law the nation's "biggest step toward becoming a practicing democracy since Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation 101 years ago."[25] The law authorized the attorney general to file suit to compel desegregation of public schools. It also established a community relations agency to help local communities settle racial disputes. Calling the law the strongest civil rights bill in history, Ebony acknowledged that enforcement of the measure would not be easy.

Editorial Content After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (1965 to 1970)

Sanders recalled that Ebony's editorial policy did not undergo any fundamental changes after the adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.[26] A major reason which he cited for this stability in editorial policy was that "the fundamental racist doctrine of the country remained unchanged" after the legislative action. Therefore, Ebony's basic editorial philosophy continued to advocate that blacks use every tool at their command to liberate themselves, with the exception of armed confrontation against central government. The latter option was viewed by Ebony editors as the gateway to "mass racial suicide."[27]

Although the magazine's fundamental editorial policy still emphasized success to the end of enhancing black self-images, Ebony's editorial content changed slightly. The overriding cause appeared to be the changing priorities of black people. Since Ebony mirrored those priorities, it could not easily avoid being influenced by them. The dominant change in editorial content showed itself in the increased range of civil rights stories which appeared in Ebony after the act of '64. Civil rights began to spill over into the content headings of "SPORTS," "EDUCATION," and "GOVERNMENT" in addition to "RACE." Two significant developments which influenced editorial content during the period were the adoption of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the growth of black electoral politics.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965

The 15th amendment had afforded black Americans the right to vote, and the Civil Rights Act of 1957 affirmed that right. However, intimidation, literacy tests, and the poll tax had deterred many blacks from registering to vote prior to 1965. Sensitive to the needs of black voters, Congress adopted a new voting rights bill in May of 1965. The bill included an anti-poll tax provision and extended the right to vote to those who were unable to read or write English.

Impressed with the legislation, Ebony considered the impact of the act on black voters in an article titled "Progress Report: Year of the Vote."[28] The article noted that the right to vote in the South was producing a "Negro power bloc." The article also called attention to the law's provisions which suspended literacy tests and assigned federal examiners to conduct registration.

Inadequacies in the implementation of both the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 drew prompt reaction from blacks. Consequently, Ebony published many articles and editorials in a continuing call for implementation of these two laws. Demand for federal implementation of the two acts became a dominant theme for Ebony editors during the 1965-1968 period. Of particular concern to editors was the scarcity of federal officials about the business of overseeing black voter registration.[29]

The slow implementation of civil rights legislation had again sparked restlessness in the national black community. Ebony expressed the growing impatience of blacks in its special issue on "The White Problem in America," published in August of 1965. The issue charged that the race problem in America was essentially a white problem and could be solved by seeking its source in the structure of the white community.

In the cover story of the issue, Bennett wrote, "When we say that the causes of the race problem are rooted in the white America and the white community, we mean that the power is in the white American's and so is the responsibility. We mean that the white American created, invented the race problem and that his fears and frailties are responsible for the urgency of the problem."[30]

Johnson opened the controversial issue with a publisher's statement explaining the purpose of the edition. "For more than a decade through books, magazines, newspapers, TV, and radio, the white man has been trying to solve the race problem through studying the Negro. We feel that the answer lies in a more thorough study of the man who created the problem."[31]

Several members of the white establishment press criticized Ebony for publishing the issue. Years later Business Week labeled Ebony an "Uncle Tom" magazine, accusing it of throwing "editorial haymakers" at the

white establishment.[32] However, the President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders released findings in 1968 which supported the theme of Ebony's special issue. The commission singled out white racism as a major threat to civil peace.[33]

The Growth of Black Electoral Politics

During the mid-1960s, black confrontation politics had reached a point of diminishing returns. Gradually, blacks were placing more stock in electoral politics as a means of redressing grievances. As a consequence of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, more blacks than ever before sought public office. And as blacks won election to public offices, they gained control of millions of public-sector dollars.

Ebony also went the route of black electoral politics in the latter half of the 1960s. Government and politics began to generate more stories for the magazine that in the years preceding the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The editors considered electoral politics to be of special interest in the South, where consolidation of black voting power was beginning to influence local and state legislatures. In September of 1965, the magazine carried an article titled "Georgia Legislature's New Look for 1966."[34] The story, which typified Ebony's increased coverage of politics, told how the one man, one vote rule yielded ten seats for black candidates in Georgia.

Urban Violence

Ebony's special issue on "The White Problem in America" had anticipated the wave of urban riots which would sweep the United States in the

latter 1960s. During the same month that the issue hit the newsstands, one of the most serious racial disturbances in American history erupted in the "Watts" section of Los Angeles, California. National Guardsmen assisted in quelling the disorder, which left 35 dead and almost 900 injured.

The Watts riot of August, 1965 was examined in an Ebony article written by Louis Robinson titled "This Would Never Have Happened. . . ." The article traced the cause of the racial disturbance to the arrest and alleged mistreatment of a black youth by white policemen on charges of drunken driving.[35] But Watts was only the beginning of several racial incidents which reflected the national black community's growing skepticism toward non-violent civil rights activities.

Ebony captured the skeptical attitude and the violent protests, reporting their impact on black Americans. The worst summer of racial disturbances in American history occurred in 1967. The most serious outbreaks were in Newark, New Jersey, where 26 persons died, and in Detroit where 40 died. New York City, Cleveland, Washington, Chicago and other cities were also scenes of trouble.[36]

During this period of urban violence, Ebony maintained its editorial policy of not advocating armed violence. Instead the magazine continued to espouse the non-violent civil rights approach of Martin Luther King, Jr. Sanders recalled that critics of the magazine attacked it for not conforming to their ideas of what a revolutionary magazine should be. And Ebony was condemned by some because it would not advocate burning down buildings. However, it devoted many pages to persons who committed such acts.[37]

During the urban violences of the late 1960s, Ebony maintained

its character as a feature, picture magazine. It also continued its role as an advocate for the liberation of black people. While other publications advocated diverse alternatives to civil rights issues, Ebony moved in and encouraged blacks to channel their energies into areas which would liberate them. After the storms of protest had subsided, the magazine continued to operate in favorable condition, both financially and editorially.

Summary of Conclusions

There is convincing evidence that Ebony's civil rights focus was more extensive following adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 than before the act. In the two-year period before the act, approximately 12 percent of all articles were related to civil rights issues. In the two-year period following the act, however, approximately 20 percent of all articles related to civil rights issues. According to these findings, Ebony published eight percent more civil rights related articles after the adoption of the act than before it. This increase seems to indicate Ebony's growing awareness of civil rights issues.

Evidence that Ebony gave more space to civil rights issues after the act supports observations made by Editors Poinsett and Sanders. Poinsett recalled that the range of civil rights subjects covered by Ebony increased after enactment of the '64 act.[38] Prior to the law, Ebony had not carried many articles dealing with the crises in the nation's schools or with black politics. As a result of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the magazine gave increased coverage to both subject areas in the latter half of the sixties.

Sanders observed that prior to the act, Ebony tended to lump most civil rights stories under the content category of "RACE." After the act however, Ebony placed civil rights stories under various content categories, including "ECONOMICS," "GOVERNMENT," and others. In that period, civil rights issues pervaded many facets of American life in addition to race.[39]

Social, economic, and political trends of the 1960s significantly influenced the range of interest among black readers. Following the act of '64, more blacks were making news than ever before. There were more stories to tell about the black experience, and Ebony told those stories.

Evidence also indicates that Ebony served as an advocate during the civil rights era of the 1960s. The magazine's primary tool for recommending changes in society was the photo-editorial. Some editorials published during the period specifically called for school desegregation and for federal intervention in black voter registration.[40] Ebony also called on state and federal authorities to redress problems of inadequate housing and health care available to blacks throughout the country.

Ebony was an advocate for the federal implementation of civil rights laws. The most evident example of such advocacy may be observed in its August, 1965 issue devoted to "The White Problem in America." Ebony told the world that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was inadequate in giving blacks the citizenship rights they deserved. And more interestingly, the magazine advocated that the white American must take the initiative to remedy racial injustice if the problem was to be solved.[41]

Ebony In 1980

After thirty-five years of publication, Ebony is by far the most widely read black picture magazine in the United States.[42] In 1979 the magazine's guaranteed circulation was 1.25 million readers, 87% of whom were black. Ebony is distributed in some forty countries, and it is recognized internationally as a "black oriented, general, picture magazine."

Ebony is published by Johnson Publishing Company, Incorporated, which maintains branch offices in New York, Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles. The company is headquartered in downtown Chicago. In addition to Ebony, Johnson Publishing Company produces Jet, Black World (formerly Negro Digest), Ebony Jr., and Black Stars. Ebony, however, is the most successful Johnson publication. The magazine's typical contents include photo coverage of major events in black society, in-depth articles on famous black personalities, black success stories, sports articles, black history writings, and photo-editorials.

Ebony's Future

Ebony editors anticipate no change in the magazine's editorial policy in future years. According to Poinsett, "Ebony will still be stating the case on behalf of black people and calling a spade a spade." However, as priorities of black Americans change, the magazine's editorial content will reflect those changes. As Sanders noted, "Ebony will be dealing with whatever issues significantly affect the lives of black people, both negative and positive."

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